Increased Aerial Resupply in COIN

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to

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Late one night, Marines maintained a key firm base far separated from the constantly patrolled and convoyed main supply routes (MSRs) of al Anbar, Iraq. Resupplying this area of Kilo Company, 3/2's AO had proved difficult. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) had claimed half a dozen lives and wounded a couple dozen others. The hard packed dirt roads seemed an endless source of death and destruction. Marines would rather forgo the rest and comfort offered back at their battalion camp just to avoid the constant IED threat, preferring to hump throughout their area of operation (AO). However, tonight the mood was quite different. The Company's forward air controller (FAC) was on-scene to execute an event that took months to coordinate.

Five miles to the southeast, a section of CH-46E Phrogs launched from al Taqqadum (TQ) air base. A single F/A-18D Hornet prowled the sky overhead, while a section of AH-1W Cobras scanned the landing zone (LZ). The two CH-46s landed, dropping off four pallets consisting of MREs, water bottles, and much appreciated extras from the TQ chow hall. A squad of eager Marines boarded the Phrogs for the five-minute flight to their battalion rear area at Camp Habbaniyah. The insurgents' most effective and feared weapon of IEDs would claim no Kilo Marines that night. The Phrogs dropped the Marines off at Habbaniyah's

LZ and continued with their nightly assault support mission. The Cobras returned to their night of MSR convoy escort. In sum, the aerial resupply mission involved a thirty minute assault support request (ASR), twenty minutes of borrowed convoy air, and the utilization of an already scheduled Hornet. Third Battalion Second Marines conducted numerous similar night aerial resupply missions over the next three months.

So why did it take months of coordination and planning for one Marine battalion to conduct an operation that should be a core capability of Marine assault support?[1] Why were more Marine battalions not conducting aerial resupply to avoid the enemy's greatest threat? Aerial resupply in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations currently is underutilized and must be increased to ensure mission success.

Current Underutilization of Aerial Resupply

Marine infantry battalions operate numerous company-, platoon-, and squad-sized firm bases dispersed throughout their AOs. The sustainment of the numerous positions greatly increases battalion and company convoys creating more targets for IED attacks. Often convoys rely on high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle (HMMWV) instead of the more protected seven-ton medium tactical vehicle replacement (MTVR).

[1] United States Marine Corps. MCWP 3-2: *Aviation Operations*. Washington, D.C.: GPO, May 2000, 2-3.

Aerial resupply can reduce this burden and threat. Currently aerial resupply is underutilized by the Marine Corps in al Anbar province. Underutilization is due to the misuse of assault support assets, the repeated denial of requests, and the under value of aerial resupply.

A majority of the available assault support assets have been relegated to providing nightly bus service throughout western Iraq. Limited assets are misused transporting an assortment of staff members, contractors, interpreters, VIPs, and other "essential" personnel via the established ring routes.

The ORM airspace threat level matrix, which was adopted in the spring of 2006, proved another obstacle for aerial resupply. The green through black airspace classification system effectively denied aerial resupply to the Marine infantry battalion that would most benefit from it. (Airspace from Ramadi east through Fallujah was classified as a black zone). Pre-planned rotary wing close air support (RWCAS) was also adversely affected by this ORM system.[2] All Marine rotary wing aircraft were subject to these ORM restrictions that greatly limited their employment. The repeated denial of both RWCAS and aerial resupply caused battalions to look elsewhere for support. A vicious cycle was created wherein aerial resupply requests were denied due to ORM, unavailable assets, higher priorities, and

[2] Michael D. Grice, "Fear of Flying, Unintended Consequences of ORM," *Marine Corps Gazette,* June 2007, 16.

eventually, a lack of requests. In the end, the perceived risks outweighed the undervalued benefits.

Increased Aerial Resupply Ensures Mission Success

Aerial resupply enhances COIN operations by avoiding surfaces/exploiting gaps, boosting morale, reducing the negative impact on the local populace, and ultimately ensuring mission success.

IEDs are the primary threat. In Iraq they account for nearly 40% of all coalition hostile-fire deaths and up to 70% of all hostile-fire wounded.[3] Utilizing night helicopter aerial resupply sustains firm bases by exploiting the insurgency's lack of night air defense, while avoiding its weapon of choice. The newly published Army and Marine Corps COIN doctrine agrees: "… logisticians should maximize intra-theater aerial resupply. This practice reduces the vulnerability of resupply activities to ground-based attacks by insurgents."[4]

Aerial resupply positively affects morale as demonstrated by the 2007 RAND Corporation report titled "Airlift Capabilities for Future U.S. Counterinsurgency Operations"

> The positive influence of airlift on counterinsurgent morale and confidence is also well documented and strategically important. Wherever they have benefited from it, counterinsurgent military personnel have commented that airlift support reduced their sense of isolation, even when they were widely deployed during

[3] "Iraq Coalition Casualty Count," *iCasualties.org*, <http://icasualties.org/oif/stats.aspx> (15 December 2007).

[4] Department of the Army, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency,* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, December 2006), 8-8.

> security-phase operations, and increased their confidence that they would be reinforced, supplied, and evacuated when needed. Airlift also reduces troop fatigue and wastage by improving diet and reducing the time and casualties incurred in moving into and out of battle areas. Rested and confident soldiers are not only more effective militarily, they are also likely to be more astute and restrained in their use of force and thus less likely to commit the mistakes in their use of the force that can undo counterinsurgencies as effectively as military defeats.[5]

In addition, the effect of a "shared threat" mentality between the infantrymen and their air wing brethren cannot be underestimated.

Increased aerial resupply also reduces the number of military convoys, which "…minimizes negative effects of COIN logistic activities on public roadways and reduces the potential for alienating the populace."[6] Less traffic also reduces the chances for collateral damage in response to an insurgent attack.

Counterarguments

Opponents claim that the strategic implication of an aircraft shot down is too great. However, insurgency forces have not demonstrated a credible threat to night aviation operations.[7] Moreover, war is an inherently risky business. Aviation assets should not be underutilized or shielded at the cost of ground units. A shared threat by both air and ground forces is necessary. ORM must not become risk aversive.

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[5] Robert C. Owen and Karl P. Mueller, *Airlift Capabilities for Future U.S. Counterinsurgency Operations*, RAND Corporation, Project Air Force, June 2007, 8-9.

[6] FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency, 1-15.

[7] Nearly all of the 40 hostile-fire shoot downs have been during daylight hours. (Open source summary by Wikipedia)

Others claim too few assault support assets are available to provide consistent aerial resupply. The reality of the Marine Corps aviation in al Anbar today is that a division sized force is being supported by barely an air group size cadre of assault support aircraft.[8] Availability is stretched more often by the misuse of limited assets and ORM restrictions: Aerial resupply has been relegated to a low priority creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. The use of proactive aerial resupply would reduce the number of reactive CASEVAC needed. Underutilized and undervalued aerial resupply causes the infantry units that would most benefit from it to abandon aerial resupply altogether and to incur riskier forms of transport resulting in casualties from IEDs.

Conclusion

Counterinsurgency operations emphasize the need for aerial resupply. Sufficient assault supports assets must be dedicated to fulfill all COIN missions. Infantry battalions must understand and maximize the benefits of aerial resupply in COIN by demanding appropriate aerial resupply support. ORM cannot become risk aversive and deny vital assault support. Increasing aerial resupply in COIN operations will ensure mission success.

1325 words

[8] 4-5 assault support helicopter squadrons and 1 KC-130 squadron.(OIF TEEPs) Additionally, due to ORM restrictions, the RCT and BCT that operate in the Ramadi and Fallujah AOs have limited to no access to CH-53Es.

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